

## There is no Cheap Hope

*This is the sermon delivered at the closing act of worship of the Seoul theological consultation.*

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*Text: Luke 23: 26-28; 33-34; 39-43.*

I In the New Testament, there is no hope without the resurrection. But hope does not have to wait for the resurrection. There is no hope without the cross, either, and hope can begin in the midst of suffering. Let me make three observations about hope and suffering in the light of what the Bible says about the crucifixion as recorded by Luke.

The first fact of the cross is the suffering, not the hope. Let me read Luke 23:26:

“And as they led (Jesus) away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus... And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, weep for yourselves...’”

One of the best novels about Korea in English is *The Martyred* by Richard Kim, though it fails to catch the true spirit of Korea's martyrs. It opens in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang (which happens to be my home town). The city has fallen to advancing United Nations troops. The South Korean army begins to set up its intelligence headquarters in what remained of the Central Presbyterian Church, once the largest church in the country, now only a shell. There the main character of the book, a Korean intelligence officer, learns that the North Koreans, just before their hasty evacuation, spared two who were left in prison and freed when the city fell. Essentially the novel is the search for an answer to two questions. Why were two allowed to live? And what really happened to the twelve martyrs? But a deeper question is interwoven into the drama of the search for the truth of the affair.

The young intelligence officer is the first to put that deeper question into words. He finds the two survivors. One of them is

out of his mind from his sufferings. The other is hollow-faced, with feverish eyes and a racking cough. The survivors say they don't know why they were spared, or what happened to the other twelve. The officer doubts them. Moreover he is not a Christian. But as he looks at the two living wrecks in front of him, and thinks of the twelve murdered men, all the remembered horrors of the war flash through his mind and a wave of emotion sweeps over him. He breaks off the interrogation and turns to leave. Then he stops and asks one last, hesitant question. "Your god..." he says, "is he aware of the suffering of his people?"

Isn't this what our consultation has been all about? Man struggles. Does God care? Man struggles for life and peace and justice and truth. But even when he succeeds, life is suffering, and peace is elusive, and justice is blind. As for truth, most of the world is still asking, with Pilate, "What is truth?"

The novel gives no clear answer. The officer asks, "Is your god aware of his people's suffering?" And the hollow-eyed minister, still wrapped up in his own suffering, is silent.

Perhaps that is where most people begin — with a silent, almost fatalistic acceptance of suffering, suffering without rational explanation. It is where our text begins. Simon, innocent and uncomprehending, has laid on him the cross. And the women wail, and Jesus turns and says, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves..." Why? What had they done? And there is no answer. But neither is there any dodging of the fact that human struggle means human suffering. That is the first lesson.

But Asia needs no reminder of that fact. This continent has known more human pain than all the other continents combined. Japan: from the Tokyo earthquake to Hiroshima. Indonesia and the islands of the sea: and the greatest volcanic disasters in history. India: I walked through the streets of Calcutta and I could feel the pain. China: a year or so ago north of Peking in one gigantic earthquake a million people died. And the world paid very little attention. Asia was far away.

The suffering is still more cruel when it is not so much man against nature but man against man. The "haves", for example, contrasted with the "have nots". The thirty poorest countries in the world, I am told, are all in a broad band of poverty stretching from south eastern Asia across into Central Africa. In Asia alone live 245 million people who must live on 11 cents a day or less. Eleven cents! Why I spend twice as much for a cup of coffee and don't even think about it. 245 million people is more than live in the whole United States. And 11 cents a day is £3.40 a month.

And there are the sufferings of the struggle for justice and for peace. This country of Korea has had to fight off 287 major invasions simply to maintain its own independence. War after war after war, and very little peace.

But the deepest sufferings of all are in man's struggle for truth. "I am the truth", said Jesus, and where He is not known there is a sickness of the soul that is a sickness unto death. And Asia may not know why, but here Asia suffers most of all, for Asia is the least Christian continent, at least numerically, in the world.

"Daughters of Jerusalem," says Jesus, and he is speaking not only to Jerusalem, not only to Asia, but to the whole world — "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, weep for yourselves..." Not much comfort; not much hope there. Only the bitter reminder that life is hard, and that human struggle means human suffering.

II But the text does not stop there. If the first fact of the cross is the fact of suffering; the second fact is that we do not suffer alone. God suffers with us. Let me read on in the gospel record: Luke 23:32, 35.

"Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left... And the people stood by, watching..."

I have been speaking of the sufferings of Asia. The cross speaks of human suffering also, but much more. It speaks of the suffering of God. I think it is peculiarly fitting that out of Asia's pain, as filtered through a Christian mind, should come one of the most penetrating modern insights into the meaning of the cross. I refer to Kazoh Kitamori, the Japanese theologian, and his "theology of the pain of God". Kitamori traces pain beyond man's suffering, beyond Jesus' physical suffering on the cross, into the very heart of God. "Pain", he says bluntly, "is the essence of God".

He has his critics, of course, He has been accused of the ancient heresy of patripassionism. He defends himself very well there. But I wonder, the more I read of the theology of pain and compare it with God's revelation of himself in the Bible, if love is not nearer to the essence of God than pain. If justice is not nearer to the essence of God than pain. If power, and truth are not nearer to the essence of God than pain. But Kitamori is absolutely right in reminding us that the Christian hope is not cheap. The cross is not a sentimental illustration of God's sweet love for everybody. It was agony. Nor is it a revolutionary model of solidarity with the oppressed. In that agony Jesus held out hope to only one of the thieves crucified with him. Our struggles are not always God's

struggles. The cross doesn't reduce to a slogan. God's pain is deeper than that. His suffering is neither physical nor political, though it embraces all who suffer, whether in the body or in the body politic. His pain, — to return to Kitamori — is the price God pays for loving the unloveable, for hating sin but caring for the sinner, in a word, the price he pays to forgive without destroying the line that divides right from wrong, justice from injustice. The price he pays to save is to let his Son die, and in that pain his love and wrath are synthesized, "for the pain is the act of swallowing up his wrath." We do not suffer alone.

III God is with us, and there lies our hope. The third fact of the cross is that our hope is in God alone. Not in our struggle. Not even in his suffering. But in the fact that He is God. But I do not need to remind Reformed theologians of that. Let me read on in the text: One of the criminals turns to Jesus (Luke 23:42-43):

"And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And (Jesus) said to him, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'."

When we are in the presence of the King, how quickly hope goes to work. Even in our suffering, it becomes immediately operative. Note the word "today". God is with us now, and a surge of power and hope lifts us up in the midst of our struggles.

The Korean Independence Movement of 1919 was the most moving mass demonstration against injustice, injustice in modern times. The price of Christian participation was that it be non-violent, and Christians led it. But it was put down brutally by the troops of the occupying colonial government. One of its leaders was Yi Sang-Chae, head of the YMCA, an outstanding Christian and a patriot. He was roughly interrogated by the Japanese police. "Who is the head of the movement? Do you know?" "Yes," he answered. They pounced on him like tigers. "Who? Tell us. Who is head of the movement?" "God", he answered calmly. "God at the head, and 20 million Koreans behind." But what if our struggle fails. Is there no more hope?

He is with us in our struggles, yes. But sometimes more important, He is with us when we suffer alone. The story it told of a dear old saint, incurably ill, who was visited by a younger friend. "You are suffering very much, I am afraid", said the younger woman, trying to be helpful. "Yes," said the older woman, "but look." She held out her hands. "There are no nails there. He had the nails; I have the hope." She pointed to her head. "There are no thorns there. He had the thorns; I have the hope."

Where then is our hope? In God, who in His Son, Jesus Christ, suffered on the cross. No cross; no hope. But if God be for us, who can be against us?

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